

"OLD ABE"
(EAGLE)

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Commander-in-Chief

"Old Abe" Eagle

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Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief

“Old Abe” the Eagle

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THE AMERICAN EAGLE

BY CHARLES D. STEWART

I

THE emblem of our country is not simply an eagle, but a particular species of eagle, and it is now quite generally considered that the choice was not a happy one. It was Benjamin Franklin who first pointed out his faults and created what has become the established point of view. He said:—

For my part, I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly. You may have seen him perched upon some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches for the labors of the fishing-hawk; and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to his home for the support of his mate and young ones, the Bald Eagle pursues him, and takes it from him. With all this injustice he is never in good case, but like those among men who live by sharpening and robbing, he is generally poor and very often lousy. Besides, he is a rank coward; the little King-bird, not bigger than a sparrow, attacks him boldly and drives him out of the district. He is therefore by no means a proper emblem for the brave and honest Cincinnati of America who have driven out all the *King-birds* from our country, though exactly fitted for the order of knights which the French call *Chevaliers d'industrie*.

Thus it is that every writer has got to say something to our eagle's discredit — that he is noted for 'robbery and the wanton exercise of power,' that 'his character poorly justifies the distinction accorded it,' or that 'there is little

to say in commendation of our national bird.' Writers no longer recall what Franklin said in so many words, but are so well posted regarding its main points that they can express it in phrases of their own. To-day the eagle can hardly be mentioned in print without the tag of inferiority and a few words of public apology.

But what are the facts in the case?

Birds generally have three toes in front and one behind, but in the osprey or fish hawk the outer toe in front can be thrown back so that there are two in front and two behind. This arrangement, like a double pair of ice tongs, is found in certain birds, such as the parrot, which have need of unusual clinging power. All over the bottom of the osprey's foot are sharp spicules which pierce the slime on a fish's scales and keep it from slipping. In other birds of prey the talons are grooved on the underside, but in the osprey they are round like a thorn.

The osprey, though belonging to the Falconidæ, has a very compact coat of feathers, like a water fowl. It is in every way fitted to dive with great speed into the water, to catch hold of a slimy, slippery, hard-coated fish, carry it to the surface, throw the water from its wings, and fly away to its nest. The osprey has an instinct which teaches it to carry a fish with the head forward, thus taking advantage of the fish's streamline design in passing through

the air. And it grasps the fish with the feet well apart, toward the head and tail, in order to have control over its live and powerful wiggling.

And there is another point in fish catching that has to do with the laws of optics. Anyone who puts a stick slantwise in a basin of water must see that there is a problem in aiming at anything under water. The object is never where it appears to be; and the surest way to miss it is to aim directly at it. We cannot say whether the osprey's brain has been peculiarly fitted to deal with this problem, but the fact is that he seldom misses the fish.

The bald eagle has no such specialized parts. Nature did not intend him to catch fish. But, in spite of this fact, he likes fish. If we wish to form a true opinion of his abilities we must watch him as he manages to get one.

He builds his nest in a tree which commands a wide view of ocean, lake, or river, and there he sits and keeps watch. There is little an osprey does that he is not aware of. And even if he were nodding at his post he would be quite sure to know when the time had come. An osprey, when he has made a catch, lets out a shrill scream. He blows his fish horn and spreads the news abroad. Nature could hardly have made a better fishmonger if she had tried.

The eagle at once starts out. His object is to get above the osprey, grapple with him, and make him drop the fish; and so we are likely to see a contest in flying, up and up and up. Finally the osprey, to avoid the moment of battle, drops the fish; and the eagle turns and goes after it. He has to outrace gravity. Nature is pulling the fish back to earth as fast as anything can ever fall, with momentary acceleration. The eagle makes a power dive and grabs that slimy, wiggling, hard-surfaced fish right out of the air. He has no special equipment but his

set purpose and a magnificent power of flight. A Milton might well search words to depict that heaven-hurled fall; a Shakespeare might dip quill in ink to express the fell purpose with which our eagle goes perpendicularly down.

The bald eagle is not lazy. He is simply not fitted to go fishing. And he is no coward, for he is perfectly willing to fight for what he wants. The osprey is a bird about two feet in length and sometimes makes resistance, but he usually knows beforehand that he is whipped. Let these, then, be points number one and two in favor of the American eagle. He gets his fish not by his born advantages but in spite of all handicaps.

II

Sixty or seventy years ago, Niagara Falls had its eagles, and no artist considered the scene complete without them. They came there to get the fish and migrating squirrels and other small mammals that were caught in the current and flung over the high brink of the falls. Even a bird so buoyant as the goose, if it does not turn back in time, is likely to be carried over and beaten to death by the weight of these waters. The bald eagles, knowing this, made the falls their constant haunt; and the sightseer who came to see the falls would find his attention half occupied by the birds that sailed fearlessly back and forth, in and out of the mist, and up to the face of these vertical waters. The white-headed eagle was a very part of Niagara Falls; and he had been swinging in those orbits ever since the time when the falls were made. That he is no longer there is a distinct loss.

Our forefathers, seeing the bald eagle at home in such a place, and hearing his shrill cry, 'like the scream of a maniac,' as he sailed into this smoking and thunderous scene, could hardly

help thinking that here was an eagle that was worthy to be made an emblem. For a variety of such reasons he came to mind as a fit choice, and on June 20, 1782, he was elected. He was made an emblem to be carried in brass effigy into battle, riding above the colors, and to be imprinted on the President's flag. And this in spite of all Benjamin Franklin could say against him.

The fact of the matter is that Franklin was in favor of a turkey. That was the bird *he* thought fit to be carried above our flag, and pressed upon our coins, and engraved upon the national escutcheon. In his attempt to turn sentiment against the bald eagle he brought up this matter of fish stealing; and it was in this connection that he brought the osprey into court. Reading his accusations in the light of these facts, anyone will now see that they are the statements of a lawyer with a case to prove. The words run to rhetoric and high recrimination. He virtually makes himself the osprey's attorney; his method is to adopt the osprey's point of view and make the one bird a witness against the other. Many things which we see in nature teach us that this is a wrong thing to do.

Of all woodland comedies there is nothing more interesting than a mob of crows all gathered in the trees around one sleepy owl and reviling him at the top of their voices. Perched at a respectful distance, they blacken his character thoroughly. They tell him he is the silent murderer who swoops down upon crows at nighttime and picks them off their roost; they tell the world in their most earsplitting tones what they think of a robber who will despoil the home and strangle little birds in their nests; and while they are doing so, still more crows arrive and add their accusations to the others. The meeting grows in righteous feeling;

jays stop to say something, and the little sparrow comes and chips in. If you happened to come along at such a time you might manage to shoot a crow. It is one of the few times when he might overlook the fact that you carried a shotgun. And during it all the owl does not shift a foot. He sits there and lets them heckle.

Now the truth of it is that a crow, sanctimonious corn eater as he might appear, is a worse nest robber, and bird killer, and all-round violator of bird life than is an owl. It is nature's best instance of the pot calling the kettle black.

The case between the bald eagle and the osprey is somewhat the same. Eagles are solitary birds, parceling out the territory in large tracts between them. But ospreys, where the fishing is good, will build two hundred or more nests in close neighborhood. In such a case they will sometimes 'gang up' on the eagle, being enabled by their numbers to make it hot for him; and in doing so they screech out heaven-knows-what in the way of epithet. The bald eagle, one might say, gets what he deserves. But who says anything about the osprey's little way of robbing the pelican? The osprey does not chase the pelican up into the sky and seize the fish as it drops; he simply swoops down and takes the food right out of the pelican's mouth. It is evident, we must agree, that you cannot take one bird's word against another. No fair judge would listen to it. In any high tribunal of nature, Franklin and his osprey would be thrown out of court. And as for his turkey, the less said the better.

Every symbol, every fable has a meaning—the one that has been handed down to us. The bald eagle, because of his temerity in breaking the Ten Commandments, has long been under a moral cloud. He could not do anything now, however virtuous, that

would not be interpreted to his discredit.

Let us take a case.

Many water birds that have been wounded in the fall hunting find themselves unable to rise and fly with the rest of the flock when they start for the South. They are left to stand about on the ice in early winter; and when there comes a light thaw followed by a sudden freeze it is not an uncommon thing for numbers of them, ducks and coots together, to have their feet frozen in and possibly a wounded wing held fast. In this event other birds, meat eaters such as the crows and herring gulls, come to prey upon them; and they stand about waiting for the unfortunate birds to die. Sometimes, in the company of the hungry ones, there will be seen a bald eagle, also waiting. He patiently sits on the ice instead of taking his meal at once, as he might easily do.

Now if the bald eagle were in good repute, and if we were looking for any virtue in him, we would see here a beauty of character, a Christian trait, worthy of being held up before a Sunday school. Though he is a true bird of prey, with beak and talons made to kill and tear, he decently waits for death; and he does not drive the others away. But instead this very picture is used to illustrate what a low sort of bird a bald eagle is. He sorts with plebeian companions in order to feed on carrion. He ought, in order to be a credit to his country, to go right in and kill.

It is only too evident that when our bird is a robber and a pirate we expect him to be a Christian, and when he is a Christian we expect him to be a pirate. Certainly if we wish him to be a Christian and a pirate both, we must allow him to be so on a Shakespearean basis: —

Lucio. Thou concludest like the sanctimonious pirate, that went to sea with the

Ten Commandments, but scraped one out of the table.

Sec. Gent. 'Thou shalt not steal'?

Lucio. Ay, that he razed.

The whole truth is that Benjamin Franklin gave the bird a bad name; and a bad name is all that is needed for man or bird.

As for that little kingbird driving a bald eagle right out of the country, — the final proof of his cowardice, — it is true that any of the birds of prey can be seen winging along with kingbirds flying after or darting down on them. But the kingbirds are not chasing the larger bird, nor did they start him going. A kingbird never takes after a bald eagle except when he is in motion. It is like the roadside dog that takes after a horse. A kingbird is simply too small for a larger bird to contend with. The 'magnanimity' which Buffon attributed to both the lion and the eagle is best shown by the latter in his wholly negligent attitude toward a kingbird.

But how about the kingbird in his own proper sphere? He will tyrannize over smaller birds as long as they will let him and no longer; and he is very careful to let a catbird strictly alone. A hummingbird could give the kingbird a thorough going-over, for hummingbirds are great fighters. The kingbird got his reputation for valor by cur-dog methods. This being the truth and nothing but the truth, the bald eagle will again be cleared of cowardice; and the kingbird will be thrown out of court.

As a matter of fact, the bald eagle is a better symbol of our country than any other eagle that could have been selected. The much-vaunted golden eagle is not wholly a bird of this country. He makes his appearance in our Northern tier of states when severe winter weather drives him down from the North. The white-headed eagle stays with us, going South in winter

and coming back to the North in summer.

As for the insinuation that the bald eagle eats things that he finds dead, that fact does not place him below the golden eagle. In winter, many golden eagles lose their lives in wolf traps in Northern states. They get their toes into the traps while trying to eat the rabbits that serve for bait. The bald or American eagle never gets caught in that way because he is away on his Southern trip.

But it is said that the bald eagle will wade into shallow water for a dead fish or eat meat that is really 'high.' He is a carrion eater. The best defense here is to carry the accusation still further. A bald eagle, if necessity pinches, and if he cannot get a chicken, or bring down a goose, a brant, or a duck, will go to earth and drive a carrion bird right away from his find and eat the meal. When the depression is on he does the best he can. He is a good hard-times bird. This does not make him a very bad example for a republic, with its extremes of high living and low.

Moreover, the bald eagle is a good defender of his home. Any mere boy can rob the nest of a golden eagle; that noble bird will 'retire' to a distance and not interfere with the intruder. You cannot do that to a bald eagle. The man who tries it will be slashed and torn. The bald eagle stays in the battle, being afraid of no man. You cannot with impunity rob a bald eagle of his constitutional rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'

I have learned to like the bald eagle. My front yard is a piece of lake shore called Eagle Point, so named in the days of the Indians because it was the favorite lookout of the bald eagle. To this day the eagles, on their way North, have an eye for it. In the past twenty-eight years there has hardly

been a spring or early summer when there has not been an eagle about for at least a day or two; and the favorite perch, commanding the water on all sides, is my great black birch, about fifty feet from my front porch. When I look out of my window and see an eagle sitting with his back toward me, I take the field glasses and bring him right up to where I feel that I could lay my hand on him.

The more I have seen and thought about the bald eagle, the more he suits me. That white head of his is beautiful. It accentuates the aquiline end of him. It gives him a note of distinction. He is not like other eagles. As for his legs not being feathered clear to the toes, that only gives naked prominence to the other business end of him. If any other nation had him for a symbol, they would load him with virtues even if half the virtues were lies. I would not trade him for any one-color bird.

III

The American eagle is not only a particular species of eagle, but he has almost become a particular eagle. The scientific name of the bird is *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*; and some ornithologists, listing the alternative or familiar names, put him down as Old Abe. This was the name of a historic eagle that went through the Civil War riding high on a perch with the Eighth Wisconsin Regiment. He was wounded twice — once on October 3, 1862, at the battle of Corinth, and once at Vicksburg. He was in the very forefront of action in thirty-six battles and skirmishes; and when the battle was at its height he would join in and do his loudest screaming. He was a sign of victory and an inspiration to the men; and when the war was over the motto of the regiment had become 'He never lost a battle.'

With the close of the war he went back to Wisconsin. On September 22, 1864, when the returned regiment marched through the streets of Madison with Old Abe bobbing on his perch at their head, the bird received a greater ovation than the men. He became the official eagle of Wisconsin, living in a room of his own in the state capitol and having his own caretaker. Although he had been shot twice and lost many a feather in battle, he kept his good health and his often angry spirit. He knew whom he liked and whom he disliked. As people would pay to see him, or contribute liberally to any cause where he was present, he became a power in raising money for the care of disabled soldiers. At a big fair in Milwaukee he caused the dollars to roll in. At the Chicago Sanitary Fair in the winter of 1864, he helped out the treasury to the tune of \$16,000.

Eleven years after the war, Old Abe being still in good spirits, the state received a request to let him be shown at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The request was submitted to the legislature, and when Assembly and Senate had adopted a resolution, and the Governor had added his signature, Old Abe took the train for Philadelphia. Thousands came to see him sitting high on his standard, as in the war; and it was here that he became a truly national bird. He seemed to be The American Eagle in his own person.

According to contract, the Exposition management was to provide him with his rations, a chicken a day. This chicken was of a breed that was dark brown or brownish black, a stipulation insisted upon by his caretaker, Jack Hill. It might seem strange that a bird so broad-minded as a bald eagle with regard to what he eats should have to be catered to in this way. But Old Abe was still raising money for the disabled

soldiers, and people were willing to pay money for a feather. If Old Abe had provided a souvenir for every person who laid down the money he would soon have run short of feathers. Jack Hill had foreseen this situation when he specified the color of the chickens. This is a piece of secret or esoteric history now first put into print.

Old Abe's parents raised him in a nest in a pine tree near the mouth of the Flambeau River in Wisconsin. He was caught by a Chippewa Indian, the son of Chief Sky, when he was two months old. The Indian sold him for a bushel of corn, and he was presented to a military company, the Chippewa Eagles, just then forming for the Eighth Wisconsin Infantry. He was christened Old Abe and was formally sworn into the United States service with red, white, and blue ribbons about his neck and a rosette of the same colors fastened upon his breast.

Twice in the course of the war he escaped and took his time about coming back. Once, when the regiment had received orders to move, Old Abe was gone. He was a small speck circling about in the sky. The regiment was allowed to delay its departure; and finally Old Abe came down, some distance away, and was coaxed back by his bearer.

When I came to Wisconsin as a boy Old Abe was still living, having now his private room in the capitol and the freedom of another as well as the capitol park in which to take an airing on fine days under the eye of his attendant. When he died he was artistically 'stuffed' and placed above the speaker's desk in the assembly chamber; and there he presided over the lawmakers for many years. When the capitol burned down on February 27, 1904, Old Abe went to heaven in flames. Now all that is left of him is the feathers which he so obligingly shed for the benefit of the soldiers.

IV

My front yard at Eagle Point juts out into a lake which the Indians called Nokomis, meaning a heart. I chose it, for one reason, because it has a commanding view, with sunrise and sunset both taking place across its waters. I had no idea, in spite of the name, that it was a place where I might expect to be visited by any eagle passing through.

The first three or four times that I looked out of my window in spring and saw an eagle sitting on my big-armed black birch I was almost ashamed to say so. Eagles are scarce, and an occasional visitant to a farmyard gets big notice in the papers. However, there are eagles, and they do pass through; and, as they all have the same eye for a commanding situation over the water, it was to be expected that any eagle might come down at Eagle Point.

Of late years, since I have closer neighbors, I can say without blushing that I spent part of the morning looking at my eagle with the field glass—especially since my next-door neighbors, for the past five years, have happened to see the same eagles that I have. In the course of twenty-eight years I know of two of these eagles that have been shot, one of them on the same day that he had been visiting my place and went out to make a raid on a farmyard.

Because of these flattering visits I became more and more interested in eagles. And then my memory turned back to Old Abe, whom I knew only in his stuffed condition. And I became more and more skeptical about what seemed to be undeniable facts. No eagle, said I, would ever sit on a high perch and be carried all through the Civil War. An eagle is untamable. The ancient falconers knew by experience the relative tamability of the various kinds of hawks, the peregrine,

the merlin, the gyrfalcon, and the kestrel. The kestrel is practically impossible to tame or train; and an eagle is as bad or worse. Even the more tamable hawks would sit on the hand or wrist only when there was a hood over the head and a thong on the legs. And yet we are to believe that a bald eagle sat on a perch at the top of a staff and was carried through the war!

But, it was suggested, maybe the eagle was held by a thong. Even this did not explain. My own practical experience denied it. The eagle in such a case would try to fly, and, being brought up short by the cord or thong, would lose his balance in the air and fall upside down. And then his carrier, even with a leather belt and a leather socket in which to rest the standard, would have a fine time with a ten- or twelve-pound eagle flapping about at the end of the pole. Whatever credit or discredit there may be in an attitude of skepticism, a man can have no excuse for easily deserting his own known facts. I had had some experience with a bird of prey in Chicago, and the quickest way to make the whole point clear will be to tell about it.

One day in 1903, I was walking along Dearborn Street in Chicago when my eye was caught by a crippled man sitting on the pavement at the corner of an alley with an owl in his lap. It was a beautiful specimen of the big, long-eared owl, the true 'tiger of the woods.' The owl was in a cloth bag with his head out, a puckering string drawing the mouth of the bag close up around his neck. The neck feathers of the bird overlaid and fitted down to the cloth as neatly as if his head had grown on the bag; and the rest was just a big, shapeless lump of bag with the owl's body in it. The bird was for sale, I found; and the price was one dollar.

I bought it and took it to my office at 182-184 Dearborn Street, an old build-

ing of passing grandeur, with walnut banisters on wide stairs and floors of alternate walnut and maple, belonging to Hetty Green, the 'richest woman in the world.' I released the owl on my desk and he sat there motionless for a while and blinked an eye. Then I lifted him up to the top of the desk; and there he sat for two days without making any motion that I could see. He seemed an ideal pet and household ornament. I did not know then that the long-eared owl is one of the most ferocious of birds, and that there is no telling when he is going to become excited and have a streak of ferocity.

After the two days I took him home, and for some time we kept him in the kitchen. Then I saw that the ideal place for such a big, meat-eating bird would be on a wide shelf outside the window. I made a shelf about two feet wide and tied him with a light chain; and with this arrangement complications began to arise. The owl would be moved to take flight; and the next instant he would be hanging upside down at the end of the chain and beating about powerfully with his wings. I had an idea that he would learn not to do that; but not a day passed that he did not try it again and come to the same grief.

I found, from watching his struggles, that a big bird hanging upside down like that cannot get into flight or otherwise help himself to get back on the perch. An owl is a short-winged bird of considerable power, so that if any bird could perform such a feat he ought to be able to. A long-winged bird would be, if anything, more helpless.

The owl did not learn his limitations. Every day it was the same case of flop and dangle. Then I saw that the right way to keep him would be to shorten the chain so that he could not get his feet beyond the edge of the shelf.

When I took him in, after the usual upside-down experience, to make his leash shorter, I found that I had a ferocious bird on my hands. His claws were clutched around two of my fingers, two before and two behind, and so powerful was his grasp that I was afraid he would go through to the bone. An owl can put a hole right through a rat with his claws. As for his eyes, now that he was aroused, I do not see how two mere big lenses could convey such a look of imminent danger. I set him down quietly on the table and waited hopefully for him to relax; and by the time he did I had decided not to keep an owl. I put a pillow case over his head, and made arrangements with a boy who had a soap-box wagon to take him up to Lincoln Park and deliver him to Cy Devry with my compliments. It was a donation to the City of Chicago. And that very afternoon we went to see him in the big stone grotto where the owls were kept; but now we could not tell our own owl from the rest of them.

I had paid considerable attention to that bird's efforts to fly when he was hanging on a leash; and so I was unwilling to believe that an eagle could go through a war sitting securely on a perch and fastened with a thong. History says that he did; yet no falconer could believe it, and neither did I.

I went to Madison to look into the matter. More especially I wanted to get a picture of Old Abe sitting on his perch and see what it might reveal. And then I saw what I should never have been able to see if I had not owned an owl. Beneath Old Abe there was a slanting shield decorated with stripes and the usual field of starry blue. Ostensibly it was mere decoration, a patriotic touch beneath the perch of The American Eagle. But the fact is that that shield was a shelf, and it did not originate out of purposes of

decoration. The thong was just short enough to prevent Old Abe from stepping over the edge if he got off his perch and started to fly. If he fell he would be on the shield and be able to get on his feet again; and then, as the shield had a considerable slant to it, convenience would suggest that he get back on his perch.

It was easy now to perceive the successive steps by which some soldier who first had Old Abe solved the problem of carrying an eagle as a battle standard. First he placed him on a perch, naturally; and the eagle as naturally started to fly and got upside down and thrashed about helplessly. Then a shelf was placed close under him so that he would fall on it and be able to regain his feet; and the length of the thong was regulated accordingly. Then the shelf was slanted, and shaped and painted so that it was an ornamental and quite appropriate shield that betrayed no inkling of its real purpose. The slant gave the public a view of the stars and

stripes upon it, and at the same time it made the eagle more disposed not to sit there but to get back to his proper station.

By this time, all evidence that Old Abe was controlled by any ingenious device had wholly disappeared. No one would ever think of it. Some of the subtlest and most effective machinery consists not of moving parts but of invisible principles. The solution of such problems engaged some of the best mental powers of Poe.

After all, it is a good thing to hold to your known facts even if they seem to be controverted by history. When known fact clashes with known fact, we see the answer to that question, What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body? They merge.

Anyway, I was glad that I had stuck to what I know; for now I am able to hand down to posterity the secret and essential principles for making a battle standard out of a live American eagle.

